



January 2021 Newsletter



CREATE INSPIRING JOURNEYS

Happy New Year! A time to look forward with hope that our lives will return to normal in 2021, when we can meet family and friends, enjoy theatre and concerts, cheer on our favourite teams, and once again create inspiring journeys.

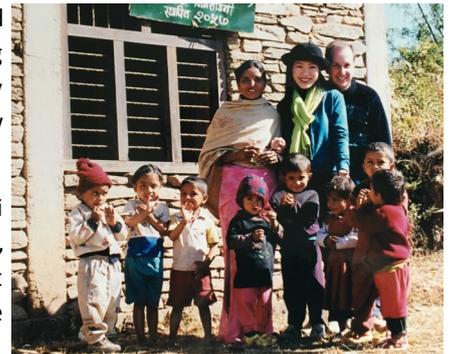
Over the coming months four Asian festivals share that theme of “hope” and “renewal”. In this newsletter, four friends tell us about those celebrations. Many friends kindly shared travel memories during the past year, writing articles which enabled me to produce newsletters through the lockdown. Often I was asked for my story? So, I am pleased to share my memory of travel in Nepal. Economically quite a poor country, but blessed with an abundance of geography and nature, history and culture.



The knock on the door came at 6am, an early start to Christmas Day. On the doorstep outside the cottage we found a small red stocking with simple gifts and a flask of tea. Our “Santa” urged us to bring the flask and climb the short path to the ridge. As dawn broke behind us, ahead of us the Himalayas came into view, bathed in a soft pink glow. We were spellbound by the awesome majesty of earth’s greatest mountain range.

Tiger Mountain Lodge is a charming hotel on the hills above Pokhara, Nepal’s second city. After breakfast we took a hike with a guide through the villages, stopping frequently to chat with locals as they went about their daily routine. At the tiny schoolhouse the children asked “where you from?” and we attempted to explain how is life in England and Singapore. An enchanting way to spend Christmas Day.

We had commenced our tour of Nepal in the Kathmandu Valley, the cradle of Newari culture and Nepal’s political and economic capital. The fertile bowl-shaped valley, lying 4,600ft above sea level, has been settled continuously for 1,500 years. A transit point on the historic trade route between India and Tibet, the Nawaris were influenced by Hindu and Buddhist faiths, creating a rich cultural heritage.



In the 15th century, during the Malla Dynasty, the valley was divided into three kingdoms: Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur, which vied with each other in trade, art, and architecture. Fortunately, this results in three magnificent Durbar Squares with exotic temples and palaces constructed of terracotta and intricately carved timber.

I loved walking the ancient narrow streets, to tiny shops where shopkeepers would proudly present their fabrics or describe their spices. My favourite were the jewellers, where the owner would delight in gently unwrapping cloth parcels to reveal tiny precious stones. We selected a garnet and had it set in a silver ring.

The third stop was Chitwan National Park, in the Terai lowlands on the border with India, where we spent three relaxing days at Tharu Lodge. Chitwan is home to the greater one-horned rhino and safari drives through the long grass offered sightings of these rare beasts. I remember chancing upon a peacock and being astonished how well these birds can fly when startled.

We returned to Kathmandu to celebrate New Year with a feast at Dwarika’s Hotel, a living museum of Nawari craftsmanship. Being Nepal, even the time zone is unique, so our countdown to midnight was shared by no other country in the world.

Quiz: If it’s midnight in Kathmandu, what is the time in Greenwich?

Chinese New Year (Cow): Feb 12th by Tony Sit, Hong Kong

Across the world, Chinese communities welcome the New Year with a hearty reunion dinner, giving red packets (Lai Si), and watching the lion dance.... but in Hong Kong we have a special “village tradition” with roots in the rural villages of the New Territories founded during Song dynasty (960AD).

In the old days, villagers found trees which had “spiritual” power. Some villagers started to worship them. This worship has evolved to become the “wishing” tree, where people from all over Hong Kong come and make a wish for new year.

I take the family to Lam’s village (林村) in Taipo, where we find several small shops selling items to make the wish: a piece of paper, a ribbon, and an orange. We write the wish on the paper, tie it to the orange, and throw it over a branch of the tree. It’s not easy, so you must keep trying till the paper/orange are both hanging on the tree. That represents good luck and only then will your wish come true!



Songkran : April 13th - 15th by Andy Carroll, Bangkok

Songkran is Thailand’s biggest festival celebrated over three days, an outpouring of enjoyment, a time when the country is at its most alive. The translation means to “pass into” and in older times was the start of the new year. What separates this new year celebration from others is how they do it!

Thailand’s climate is tropical and no better way to cool down than with a water fight. The streets are filled with people of all ages throwing and pouring water onto each other, this is a symbol of good health and fortune for the next year. As the saying goes: “the wetter the better”!

You also see people covering each other’s faces with white chalk, this represents the monks making blessings, again it is considered lucky, and who doesn’t want a little good luck?

For me, the best place to witness and enjoy the celebration would be Chiang Mai, with its small area size and huge local participation you can really get into the Songkran spirit.



Holi : March 29th by Anil Pathak, Mumbai

Holi - the Festival of Colours - celebrates the triumph of good over evil, as well as new beginnings with the advent of spring.

On the eve of the main festival a bonfire is lit, symbolizing the killing of *Holika*, a demones in Hindu mythology. The next day, the streets are filled with bursts of colour. Children squeal in delight as they race about with clouds of *gulaal* (coloured powder) in their wake, whilst the elders with water guns, join in the fun.

Growing up, relatives would stream by our home, bearing sweets. Cousins would engage in mock war, squirting coloured water at each other. Visitors would be persuaded to stay for lunch, which lasted all afternoon. For several days after, we went to school wearing the scars of battle in the form of stubbornly resistant colour in our hair and behind our ears!



Cherry Blossom Festival : April by Toshi Iwama, Tokyo

Japanese cherry blossoms bloom for just 7-10 days, in April each year. We love the beautiful flowers and graceful trees which evoke a sense of Japanese Samurai spirit. It is also a moving reminder of the impermanence of beauty and the realisation that nothing lasts for ever.

In Japan the month of April marks the start of the academic year and also the financial year; a time of change when children start school or move to a new class, when students graduate from college, when young adults start a new job, and employees change role or position at work.

Because these significant life events are celebrated against the backdrop of the blooming cherry blossoms, the festival has a special place in Japanese hearts. It is an occasion to reflect on our life, to recall the unforgettable scenes, and to think of people there in the past.

